DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 297 312 CS 009 267

TITLE National Adult Literacy Policy: A Proposal from the Working Group on Adult Literacy.
INSTITUTION International Reading Association, Newark, Del.
PUB DATE 8 Sep 88
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Literacy; Elections; Federal Legislation; Federal Programs; Functional Literacy; *Illiteracy; *Literacy Education; *Politics of Education; Presidential Campaigns (United States)

ABSTRACT

Presented to Americans and addressed to presidential candidates in this election year, this proposal: (1) identifies the extent of the literacy problem in America; (2) outlines the current efforts to address the problem; (3) discusses the roles of the sectors; and (4) recommends actions for the next administration. The proposal urges an improved system of literacy services characterized by access, options, accountability, quality, support of learners, and linkages between literacy and other services. It concludes with specific proposals for the next President of the United States regarding strong leadership, increased resources, and a literacy infrastructure. (SR)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
L. W. Kline
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

# NATIONAL ADULT LITERACY POLICY: A PROPOSAL

from the

WORKING GROUP ON ADULT LITERACY

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED297312

## SUMMARY

Every election presents Americans with opportunities and options. The Working Group on Adult Literacy presents this paper to the next President of the United States as an opportunity and an outline of the extent of the literacy problem in America, the current efforts which address this problem, and recommended actions for the next administration. The Working Group on Adult Literacy proposes an enhanced system of literacy services which would be characterized by accessibility, options, accountability, and quality programs for learners and all citizens. This proposal provides each presidential candidate with the direction to build a more literate America.

## INTRODUCTION

Adult literacy is crucial to America's future—to the strength of our families, the health of our economy, the functioning of our democracy, and to our position in the world. Only Presidential leadership can ensure that the basic literacy needs of all Americans are met. No greater domestic cause can motivate Americans, now or in the future.

More than 23 million Americans lack basic literacy skills, and millions of others are deficient in literacy skills needed to function optimally as workers, as family members and as citizens. Reading, writing, computation, language competency, and problem solving skills must be improved, integrated, and applied to everyday learning, living, and work settings. As a nation, we must improve adult literacy to maintain our economic health, strengthen our families, and ensure the future of our democracy and our communities.

- *The health of the national economy depends on the skills of our workers.*

A workforce lacking sufficient basic skills threatens economic productivity, our competitive position in the world economy, and ultimately, the jobs on which people depend to support their families. Skill levels required to work productively in America are increasing daily. The Department of Labor estimates that by the year 1990, 75% of new jobs will require at least a high school education. Furthermore,

CS009267

75% of the current workforce for the year 2000 is present. Clearly, future economic health depends on improving the skills of our workers.

- *The strength of our families depends on the literacy of family members.*

The factor which correlates most closely with a child's ability to succeed in school is the educational attainment of its parents. Without the encouragement of literate parents, many children cannot achieve in school. Despite the best efforts of the nation's elementary and secondary schools, millions of children in low income families may be doomed to repeat the cycle of welfare dependency if they do not receive educational encouragement and help at home, as well as in school. The 1986 National Assessment of Educational Progress concluded that there was a high correlation between the literacy skills of young adults and the literacy levels of their parents.

- *The future of our communities and our democracy depends largely on the literacy of our citizens.*

Millions of Americans are locked out of meaningful participation in community endeavors and the democratic process because they do not have adequate basic skills. Large numbers of people do not have the skills to participate meaningfully at work, in their communities, and in their government. This alienation can result in criminal involvement and incarceration. Millions of recent immigrants may lose their opportunity to participate fully in American life if they ar not taught to communicate in the English language. People must be able to acquire, understand and use written information.

## STATUS OF EFFORTS TO RESOLVE THE PROBLEM

National consciousness of the literacy problem has risen, in large part, to the print and electronic media. Public awareness campaigns such as Project Literacy U.S. (PLUS), a joint broadcasting effort of Capital Cities/ABC and PBS, have been very effective in bringing attention to the issue. Organizations representing Americans from all walks of life such as the American Bar Association, the American Newspaper Publishers Association, the National Urban League, and the United Auto Workers, have made adult literacy a priority. Fortune 500 companies and community groups alike have joined in recognizing the significance of adult literacy.

In the states, 38 governors have formed state initiatives in an attempt to help coordinate literacy efforts and increase resources. Mayors, county leaders, and

school administrators have joined in efforts to alert the public to the severity of the problem.

Despite these dramatic increases in public awareness of the problem, resources devoted to providing literacy skills are growing slowly while the demand for services is increasing dramatically.

- The federal government allocates less than $300 million each year to provide basic literacy skills to adults in this country.

- **This amounts to less than $10 per year for each American adult who does not possess a high school diploma.**

Just recently some states provided additional resources to attack the problem. State and local governments have spent only about $309 million in 1986 for adult basic education. That level represents a doubling of funding on the part of the states in the last three years, however, most of that increase resulted from actions in only three states.

Public awareness has brought an increase in the demand for literacy services, and has also contributed to an increase in volunteer literacy tutors, contributions by the private sector and involvement of the non-profit sector. Today, more than 100,000 volunteer tutors are teaching reading and other literacy skills. Colleges, universities, community colleges, libraries and community-based organizations have begun to join school-based adult education programs and volunteers in efforts to improve adult literacy. **However, these efforts fall far short of the need.**

Despite growing concerns, significant problems remain. Efforts to improve adult literacy have been hurt by fragmentation and a lack of resources. Providers of literacy services lack the funding and support systems that would ensure sustained, quality services. Too often they also lack the teachers, materials, and technology necessary to improve and stimulate the learning process for many people seeking assistance.

## ROLES OF THE SECTORS

**In providing literacy services, the public, private, and non-profit sectors of society have not adequately addressed the job at hand.**

The **federal government** has provided exhortation to action, cooperation in public awareness efforts, and minor funding... but little help in planning, policy coordination, research and development, or support for training.

- Federal programs supporting adult literacy include: the Adult Education Act; the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA); the VISTA

Literacy Corp; the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG); the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA); and the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA).

- Adult Basic Education (ABE), funded through the Adult Education Act, is the only federal program totally devoted to adult education. According to federal statistics, adult basic education programs enrolled about 3 million persons in 1986, as compared to the 23 million plus in need of improved skills.

**State governments** have contracted with local service providers, coordinated services, provided staff training and limited technical assistance.

- Frequently a key state official assumes a leadership role in the coordination of literacy services at the state level.

- States provide about half the money currently allocated to improving adult literacy, although state funding commitments vary widely.

- States, as a whole, do little research and development of new techniques for teaching adults, and provide only a minimal amount of staff development.

- Many states allocate only the currently required 10% match for federal funds.

**Local governments**—including municipalities, counties, school districts, and special districts—are often direct service providers. They recruit students, provide classes or tutoring, and provide staff development for teachers.

- Local governments have little or no role in funding literacy efforts, although some recently have become involved in raising private funds to support literacy efforts.

- Local governments, while sometimes serving in a coordinating role, typically do little research or policy development.

**Private businesses and organized labor** have become more involved in the literacy effort within the past few years, but their roles have been limited. They have, on occasion, offered a positive environment in which to identify and recruit people

needing basic skills, and have provided limited funds and other resources to service providers, and aided in public awareness campaigns.

- Despite claims that private businesses spend more than $30 billion per year on training, only a very small percentage of these funds is directed at providing basic literacy skills.

- A few companies have seen adult literacy enhancement as a promising market and have invested in research and development of literacy-related products.

**Non-profit organizations** including volunteer tutoring groups, churches, and community-based organizations have increased public awareness of the problem, raised funds for local programs and provided literacy services.

- It is unrealistic to expect that the national need for literacy enhancement can be met by the volunteer sector, or any other sector, alone.

- Volunteers and community-based organizations are currently providing approximately 10% of literacy services nationwide. As an example, Literacy Volunteers of New York State, the second largest state volunteer program, estimate that they are providing 7% of the services in the state.

**Clearly, all of these sectors must work together to address the issue of improving adult literacy in America.**

## A New System for Enhancing Adult Literacy

We propose an improved system of literacy services to provide literacy skills to all Americans in need.

This system cannot be developed overnight. A long-term commitment must be made by all parties—including federal, state, and local governments as well as private and non-profit sectors—to meet the adult literacy needs.

This new system should assure:

- *Access.*
  All people who need to upgrade their literacy skills, even those functioning at the lowest levels, must have easy access in their communities to affordable, high quality programs, including those that employ new technologies in their teaching methods.

- *Options.*
  People who are seeking to improve literacy skills should be able to choose among providers of services and various methods of instruction whenever possible. People who wish to improve their basic skills should be able to choose between one-on-one tutoring from trained professionals or volunteers, classroom instruction, computer assisted instruction, or other instructional models.

- *Accountability.*
  Providers of literacy services must be accountable to those they serve and to those who pay the bill. Services need to be efficient and of high quality. Program funding and support should relate to program performance.

- *Quality.*
  Literacy services should enable the adult student to learn the most in the shortest period of time, and to develop strong enough literacy skills so that adults can adapt to changing life and work situations. Learning methods and technology should be state-of-the-art. Teachers and tutors should be trained and provided with in-service support.

- *Support of Learners.*
  A system devoted to improving literacy must provide educational services which are flexible enough to address the individual goals of each student. Support services such as child care, transportation, and counseling should be accessible to all students.

- *Linkages.*
  Literacy services should be linked directly to services that help students achieve other goals, such as getting off welfare, leading a crime-free life or securing a better job. Learners should be able to see the direct benefits of enhanced literacy skills.

Despite years of effort and recent advances in public awareness and concern over the issue of adult literacy, a comprehensive system of adult literacy services has not been developed. The system of literacy services envisioned here will be rooted in state and local public education agencies, private efforts and services provided through non-profit institutions and voluntary groups.

**How can the federal government help build and support such a system?**

## WHAT THE PRESIDENT NEEDS TO DO: A MODEST PROPOSAL

The federal government cannot, nor should it, take on the job of improving literacy alone. But the federal government, particularly the President, must provide leadership and resources to build the infrastructure required to sustain the effort that lies ahead.

*Leadership*

(1) The President should draw attention to the literacy crisis in America in his State of the Union Message. In a special message to follow he should explain the severity of the problem to all Americans and call on political, economic and community leaders to join in the quest for a solution.

(2) The President should explain the clear linkages between literacy and other issues, such as welfare dependency, parenting skills, crime, international competitiveness, productivity and job creation. The President should stress the importance of providing the literacy skills necessary for a fast-changing world—skills that can be used in the future.

(3) In this context, the President should challenge governors and other key state leaders to do more about the issue of adult literacy. Leaders at the state and local level should be challenged by the President to provide funding resources in addition to raising awareness. The President should also challenge business and labor leaders to offer literacy programs at the workplace to upgrade the skill levels of the workforce.

(4) The President should support continued efforts to raise public awareness about literacy through the media. At the same time, the President should recognize that public awareness creates a demand for services that will not be met unless additional resources and efforts are focused on improving adult literacy.

(5) To focus federal efforts to improve adult literacy, the President should create a Cabinet Council, composed of the Secretaries of Education, Labor, Justice, Commerce, and Health & Human Services, to oversee federal efforts and ensure coordination within the federal establishment. This Cabinet Council of Adult Literacy should be accountable to and staffed from the White House.

*Building a Literacy Infrastructure*

(1) The President should propose and the Congress should enact legislation creating a National Institute for Adult Literacy to serve as a focal point for literacy work. The institute will support a system of literacy services which includes access, options, accountability, quality and support of learners.

- The Institute should act as a clearinghouse for states, localities, and providers to learn about more effective methods, programs, organizational structures and other elements of effective literacy efforts.

- The Institute should help assess needs for literacy services and help develop measurement, assessment and evaluation tools for the field.

- The Institute needs to provide training and professional development through a decentralized system using resources and expertise from all areas of the country.

- The Institute should conduct applied research and development of better ways to teach reading, writing, computation, effective communication, and problem solving.

- The Institute should explore uses of new technologies in literacy programs.

The Institute should rely upon and be governed by those at the state and local levels who are knowledgeable about providing literacy services to adults from both a practical and research perspective. While the basic resources should be funded by Congress, the new Institute should also be empowered to accept private contributions, foundation grants and other resources to support its work. It should be governed by a board with representation from departments on the Cabinet Council, states, localities, non-profit providers of services and innovators in the field. The majority of the board should be from the non-federal sectors.

An appropriation of about $12 million per year should establish and operate the National Institute of Adult Literacy. By attracting private, state and local resources, the Institute could operate at a level of about $20 million per year.

(2) Federal programs whose success relates to enhancing the literacy of adults should be encouraged to provide more resources for research and development, training and capacity building at the state and local level to help develop a strengthened system of literacy services. The President should ensure that resources from job training, social services, education, libraries, welfare reform and other initiatives of the new administration are devoted to building the infrastructure for literacy in America.

*Resources*

(1) Since current federal spending for literacy amounts to less than $10 per adult American without a high school diploma, it is clear that more federal resources must be allocated to the problem. For a start, the President should propose that the appropriation for the Adult Education Act be at least doubled, from about $135 million to $270 million the first year. This is a modest request, one which will only begin to meet the need.

(2) A special program to support non-profit and volunteer efforts should be supported by the President. Because resources are stretched thin at the state and local levels, too little is done to support community programs and voluntary efforts. Volunteers are not free. To be effective, they must be trained, provided with materials and supported. A $10 million annual program, channeled through the states, would help to meet the need to support non-profit providers and volunteers and maximize their contribution to enhancing adult literacy.

(3) The President should support legislation to allow greater use of funds appropriated through such programs as the Job Training Partnership Act, the Social Services Block Grant, the Community Development Block Grant, the Library Services and Construction Act, the Trade Adjustment Act, Chapter 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Food Stamp Education and Training program to be used to provide literacy services to those in need. Literacy is a critical element in each of these efforts. States and localities should be free to combine resources from these and other federal programs to meet the literacy needs of their communities.

(4) State and local level coordination is essential to maximize the effectiveness of the varied funding sources which support literacy efforts at the local level. State and local literacy coordinating networks are instrumental in inter-agency policy development and coordination of public and private literacy efforts. To support the development and maintenance of state and local literacy coordinating networks, the federal government should appropriate $5 million.

The President should also seek to identify other programs ... current and pending ... whose resources should be available in the fight for adult literacy.

## CONCLUSION

Enhancing adult literacy is critical to maintaining our nation's economic health, improving the strength of our families, and ensuring the future of our democracy and our communities. Clearly, all sectors must work together to build a new, more effective system for enhancing adult literacy in America ... a system characterized by access, options, accountability, quality, support of learners and linkages between literacy and other services. The next President of the United States can lead and support the fight for literacy by providing strong leadership, increased resources and a literacy infrastructure.

The Working Group
On
Adult Literacy

# NEWS RELEASE

FOR RELEASE SEPTEMBER 8, 1988
CONTACT: Richard Long
IRA Washington Representative (202) 347-3990

## NATIONAL LITERACY GROUPS CALL FOR PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP

*Adult Literacy and Technology Project*

*American Association for Adult and Continuing Education*

*American Library Association*

*Association of State Literacy Directors*

*Correctional Education Association*

*Council of State Adult Education Directors*

*International Reading Association*

*Laubach Literacy Action*

*Literacy Volunteers of America*

*State Literacy Initiatives Network*

*Urban Literacy Network*

(Washington, D.C.) -- "There is a literacy crisis in America and the President should inform the nation in his State of the Union Message," announced Dale Johnson, spokesperson for the Working Group on Adult Literacy and Vice President of the International Reading Association at a press conference today at the National Press Club. He presented a plan to the presidential candidates to ensure the nation's future.

"Millions of Americans are locked out of good jobs, community participation, and the democratic process because they lack adequate reading and writing skills," said Johnson.

"This plan will provide the next President of the United States with the direction to build a more literate America," he said. "The President must lead the fight for literacy by providing strong leadership, increased resources, and a comprehensive literacy system." In the past, the federal government has provided little or no help in planning, researching and developing, or supporting training.

The proposal calls for a long-term commitment to be made by federal, state, and local governments, as well as the private and non-profit sectors to build a new system of literacy services. This system should be accessible to all people and provide choices of services and providers. It should also offer high quality services that meet the individual goals of each student. In addition, literacy learners should be linked with other support services, such as child care, transportation and job placement.

-more-

475 N. Cleveland Ave., Suite 210, St. Paul, MN 55104 (612) 644-9978

"Reading, writing, computation, language competency, and problem solving skills must be enhanced, integrated, and applied to everyday learning, living, and work settings," said Johnson. "As a nation, we must improve adult literacy to maintain our economic health, strengthen our families, and ensure the future of our democracy and our communities."

The Group recommends that the next President create a Cabinet Council on Adult Literacy, create a National Institute for Adult Literacy to serve as a clearinghouse and research facility, and increase federal resources.

The Working Group on Adult Literacy is composed of representatives from the Adult Literacy and Technology Project, American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, American Library Association, Association of State Literacy Directors, Correctional Education Association, Council of State Adult Education Directors, International Reading Association, Laubach Literacy Action, Literacy Volunteers of America, State Literacy Initiatives Network, and the Urban Literacy Network.

###